

7th Time's the Charm

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Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Stembrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris

Relationships: Bill Stembrough & Mike Hanlon, Bill Stembrough & Stanley Uris, Bill Stembrough/Ben Hanscom, Bill Stembrough/Beverly Marsh, Bill Stembrough/Eddie Kaspbrak, Bill Stembrough/Everyone, Bill Stembrough/Richie Tozier, Bill Stembrough/St Stanley Uris

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Summary:

Bill recounts his first seven kisses, it only took him that long before he found who he was looking for in a mess of curls and a kiss to his palm.

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Author's Note:

I was gonna write angst but you gotta do what you gotta do.

I'm dyslexic so sorry for any mistakes

I Beverly

Beverly was Bill's first kiss. They were in third grade. The stage lights danced across Bill's vision the same way that Bev's fiery hair danced when she laughed - she laughed a lot. The entire school and his own parents were watching, his heart was in his throat as he stuttered out the lines. The words got caught in his throat, the lights were taunting him while the audience merged into a uniform sea look of pity and forced grins.

His Peter Pan costume was hanging off his shoulders - it was much too big. Even to this day, Bill still remembers the trailing of his pants along the floor, the conscious thoughts of the movement of his feet to avoid tripping. Anxious butterflies fluttered around his stomach in a way that Bill wouldn't feel again for several years, the knot that built up in his throat and the quickening heartbeat were all signs and Bill knew.

He was in love.

He was in love with Beverly Marsh, the girl who sat two desks away from him. She bought him a Christmas card and wrote a smiley face in a glittery lilac pen. She twirled her hair and chewed her pencils, she came into school late and forgot her homework and she was perfect.

Bill, of course, wasn't actually in love - we don't have to let him know that.

This kiss - the ending scene - was the most important thing in little Bill's life. To his parents, the teachers and over an ocean of faceless people, this was just a show. Oh no, but to Bill - he knew better - he knew this was going to be how he met his wife, they would get married on the playground, just like Robert McNeill and Kathy Gates.

He messed up his last line in anticipation of the kiss, and just then, with a soft smile and a flurry of freckles - Bill Denbrough had his first kiss.

Nerves, Faces, Freckles.

II Eddie

For the year after kissing a young eleven-year-old Eddie Kaspbrak, Bill would flush in embarrassment and change the subject as swiftly as possible. He was embarrassed, guilty and felt ever so moronic.

The locker room lights flickered, giving Bill a headache and almost sending him into a different changing room. However, the wheezes of a broken cough flickered even louder than the light to Bill - and Bill being Bill, he rushed into the showers in his muddy shoes and his lacrosse stick whipping the wall tiles like a drum.

Bill doesn't remember much, he remembers Eddie curled up in the corner of the shower. He remembers that he was wheezing and tears were cascading down his face with the same pull as jumping off a cliff into an icy ocean. He remembers Eddie's bright red, neatly ironed gym shorts and his pale legs quivering.

He was scared, his friend couldn't breathe and he didn't know what to do. He knew of Eddie's aspirator, the medicine helped him breathe, but for some reason, it wasn't working. Eddie kept shaking it furiously at Bill's face - but Bill didn't know what that meant. Eddie was crying, long raspy sobs that echoed against the greying ceramic tiles and the speckled white flooring. The dirt from the crevices of the tiles groaned under the pressure from Bill's fingernails as Bill did all he could think to do in that moment of panic.

Bill did as he saw on the soap operas his Mother watched on TV and pressed his lips roughly against Eddie's. Eddie stilled for a moment, before shoving Bill away - sending him sprawling into the shower stall opposite. Bill, in the moment, was unfazed and promptly returned to an even more flustered Eddie and soothed his back, rubbing it in gentle motions.

After the moment, however - Bill and Eddie were both mortified and made an unspoken agreement to never bring it up again. Except Eddie had told Richie, and for the year after, Bill stomach twisted in embarrassment and his face lit up the same colour as Eddie's perfectly ironed gym shorts. For the remainder of the days that he remembered the kiss, however, Bill and Eddie would laugh.

Bill would laugh at how he truly believed the best way to cure a panic attack was a kiss. Eddie laughed at how Bill thought that Eddie would appreciate the exchange of germs. Everyone else laughed with

them.

Panic, Comfort, Embarrassment.

III Ben

Bill never counted this as his third kiss. He hadn't thought about it after the moment it happened - well that's a lie, he thinks about it every time he has an oral presentation but the memory is nothing but fond. It doesn't bring the nervous butterflies of his first, or the panic and mortification of his second. It makes him smile, makes him feel at ease and makes him feel like he can conquer the world (with the aid of his friends, of course).

It was spring of seventh grade - Bill remembers this because it was the last spring he attended the annual Derry carnival in May. It was the last spring he had before he would wake up with nightmares, or see yellow flashes of colour in the corner of his eye. Bill found it difficult to appreciate the newborn lambs and calves that roamed the fields West of Derry, but Ben tried his best to help everyone find the light again - and he appreciated Ben.

He appreciated Ben even more when Ben offered to be his partner for his oral presentation. Normally Bill would sit back and watch everyone's eyes dart to him, before scrambling to find *anyone else*. But not Ben, never Ben. The presentation wasn't more than three minutes long, but practising it took every chocolate-fuelled lunch period, every warm pink sky of the evening, every star-littered night, and even well into the ominous blanket of midnight.

Antiduh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-

It's okay Bill, try again.

Antiduh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-

It's okay, I'm sure you'll get it.

And get it Bill did. It took hours upon hours - Bill's throat was raw from reading, he could feel the scratch in his throat and no amount of icy water would cure it. With every breath, his throat felt like it was on fire.

But, he did it. On the evening of Thursday, May 4th - Bill Denbrough spoke for one-point-five solid minutes, without a single stutter.

*And that concludes our study on.... (breathe)
Antidisestablishmentarianism*

He remembers Ben cheering loudly, he remembers dropping his papers on the floor - because his teacher scolded him for crinkly papers the following day - he remembers an overwhelming rush of joy and, in the joy and triumph of it all, he grabbed Ben's cheeks and landed a wet, firm kiss on his mouth.

Ben laughed and cheered, not even doubting Bill's impulse for a

moment, and standing there, in his cluttered bedroom at eight twenty-four in the evening, Bill would remember the burning of his throat as the fire of determination.

Triumph, Patience, Persistence.

IV Richie

Bill doesn't remember the events which lead up to this kiss. He knows it involved lots of lukewarm beer and a bottle of Grey Goose vodka that Richie stole from his parents, Eddie had told him not to, because he was only turning sixteen - not twenty one. He remembers the start of the night, where all he smelled inside Stan's house (his parents weren't at home, he can't quite recall why) was cigarette smoke and soft cotton. Richie was soon told off by Stan for smoking, Stan was cross, Bill remembers that. Then Richie kept giving Bill beer, and Bill had no reason to decline. Then Richie started shots, or a drinking game - Bill doesn't remember.

He remembers a burning in his throat, but not the burn of triumph, a burn that stung like bleach and hurt so good that he couldn't help himself to stop. The next thing he remembers is Richie's mouth on his throat. They weren't at Stan's anymore - they were in a car. Stan's car. He remembers the wet and heavy air, feeling like he was inhaling density itself.

There was a fire in his stomach and on his cheeks, and his mouth fought with Richie's for what felt like hours. This kiss wasn't innocent or a symbol of a youth, this kiss was wet and hot. Oh, so very hot. Bill could hardly breathe with Richie on his mouth, forcing his mouth

open and licking up his tongue, back down, underneath his tongue, the roof of his mouth, behind his teeth - Bill doesn't remember if he fought back or if he was too busy trying to claw through his drunken haze to deduce whether grinding back on Richie would be a good idea or not.

He concluded it felt too good to not be good. He remembers Richie's hands exploring his body in a way he had never felt before, fingers tracing his chest and his back and rolling his nipples. Bill remembers liking that. Richie's mouth doing dirty, painful things to his neck and leaving blisters of purple bruises from his earlobe to his collarbone. He found one on his inner thigh and he couldn't remember if Richie had put it there or not.

He doesn't remember taking off his pants, but he remembers Richie's hands travelling down them - he doesn't remember much of Richie. Bill reckons that he must've had his eyes closed most of the time. He remembers Richie saying dirty things that made him moan and whimper, he remembers begging and holding tightly onto Richie's shirt when he comes.

It was there, in the back of Stan's car, with Richie lying on top of him, grinding down on him and whispering dirty things into his ear with a breath of vodka, that Bill realized, only the next day, that he might not have been completely straight.

Blurriness, Heavy, Regret.

Mike was the one Bill went to, not even a week after his heavy hour with Richie, for help. Help which Bill needed so desperately that he had cried, wept openly on the edge of the river, tears so heavy with confusion that Bill wished he would melt into the river and float away. Mike sat with him, not speaking, just staring off into the trees, waiting for Bill to be ready. Bill thought he might never be ready.

He was exaggerating, of course he would be ready, but much like how he had thought that kissing Beverly Marsh eight years ago would be the most important moment of his life, he truly believed that having an alcohol-fuelled moment with Richie Tozier would ruin his life.

It didn't, of course - but Bill would not yet know this, so instead, he wept until his eyes hurt and his flannel shirt was covered in snot and tears. Mike's shirt was too - but he didn't mention it.

He wept, fearlessly - his words cried out of his mouth and spilt into the water and floated away as Mike sat and listened. Taking in every word, listening to Bill's heavy stutter of concerns. Bill wept about *wanting* Richie in that car, the way boys weren't meant to want their best friends. Bill wept about *liking*, no, *loving* the way Richie made him feel, and the horrible, dirty things he said, he cried about feeling dirty, feeling foolish for getting that drunk.

But above all else, Bill cried, in this cool winter's afternoon - with the low sun casting long shadows of the squirrels scuttling up the trees, and the soft wind carrying songbirds' poems down the river like a boat - about losing a friend. Losing a friend to testosterone and Grey Goose fuelled deviance.

Mike listened, squeezing Bill's shoulders when he felt Bill's shoulders begin to shake again. Mike's firm hand on Bill's shoulder made him feel grounded, like Mike was the weight that kept him from floating out of existence.

Mike had told him that his friendship with Richie would never be ruined, even after something as risqué as what he had done. Bill disagreed, wanting the winter sun to go so low that it ate the world up in darkness. The flannel on his shirt made him feel like a bullseye - ten points to whatever tragedy in his life could make his world fall apart around him. Richie's arrow of backseat handjobs had struck him in the heart, and Richie not picking up his phone for a week had been the final arrow to shatter him.

Mike tried to assure him, no, *you're our friend. Nothing like that could change that.*

I don't buh-buh believe that.

Mike's arm fell from Bill's shoulder and firmly found its place on Bill's hand.

I can prove it, but you might not like it.

And before Bill even had a chance to dispute, Mike had leaned in, giving Bill the softest kiss his lips would probably ever feel. Mike thought that Bill might shatter under his lips, but he didn't. Their lips slowly, carefully and almost anxiously moved against each other. The feeling of Mike's lips grazing against his own felt like an angelic encounter, like his soul was lifted and his mind was dusted of his

miserable thoughts.

The kiss eventually stopped, and Bill and Mike stared off into the orange ripples of the river, the sun casting it aglow like the book of revelations. Bill had his own revelation, that he and Richie would probably be fine, just like Bill and everyone else were fine.

Bill was right, he and Richie were back to normal not two days later.

Bill and Mike were different, however, warmer and more peaceful with each other, as if the kiss that Mike had shared had transferred a part of their soul into each other, forever binding them in a blissful existence.

Connective, Blissful, Serene.

VI Stan

Bill would never forget his first (of many) kisses with Stan Uris. It was the first time he had forgot all about that dreadful summer in four years.

It was a long time coming, admittedly. It took neither of them by surprise. They were walking along the river, no real destination in sight. The moon was high in the sky, watching their fingers brushing together as they walked, bathing Stan's soft features in a stream of moonlight.

This is how it had been for a couple of months, since Christmas - Bill and Stan took afternoon walks to the store together, then to the quarry, then along the river and slowly as the days went on, the sun got lower when they decided to slip on their walking shoes. Now, it was almost midnight. There was no feeling of dread, no whispers from behind their ears and definitely no flashes of yellow. It was just them, the way it had to be.

Bill could've kissed Stan by now, and Stan would've accepted it - kissed back. But it never felt like it was the right moment, and Stan felt like the most important thing in the universe, not like the Peter Pan play or like Richie's vodka breath on his neck - but like once he had begun to look at Stan, *really* look - he couldn't imagine a world without him. And if one were to exist, Bill most definitely would not want to be a part of it.

Stan wasn't just his... lover? Boyfriend? Date? No, he was so much more than Bill, who had the highest grade in English in the forty years of records in his school, could put into words. There are over 170,000 words in the dictionary, and not one of the billions upon billions of configurations of those words could even begin to describe how important Stan was to Bill. That's why Bill never gave Stan a nickname, all of them felt like they were insults in comparison to Stan.

The wind ruffled Stan's hair in a way that he hated, but Bill adored. It made his curls bounce and twist around his face and fall into his eyes. Stan's perfectly ironed white shirt almost glowed in the reflection of the river, Bill watched the ripples lap at Stan's reflection, he could've stared at it all night if Stan would have let him. But alas, Stan marched onwards, looking back at Bill.

Follow me.

And Bill followed. Stan could have led him to the end of the Earth and back and Bill would walk, in his dirty converse, with him. Stan wrapped his hand around Bill's, their fingers intertwining as easy as blinking, and they ran.

They ran and ran the whole way to the quarry, red-faced and puffing clouds of air into the cold night. Bill laughed at Stan's grimace as he noticed a grass stain on his white shoes. Stan shoved Bill's shoulder, and Bill couldn't be happier.

So there they sat, overlooking the expanse of the water below them, holding hands and knocking feet softly against another.

Stan looked at him as though he were scared that if he didn't look every couple of seconds, that Bill would disappear, every time he did, Bill would grin and Stan would look away, trying to hide a small smile.

It was then, when Stan brought Bill's palm up to his mouth and gave it a gentle, but mindful kiss, that Bill *knew*.

I love you so fucking much.

Stan laughed, not mockingly - the laugh was warm - not warm like Mike or warm like the vodka or any of that - it was warm like *Stan* . It sounded so right and Stan muttered it back, with a smile present in his voice.

I love you too.

With the moon watching them, casting rays down to make Stan's lips shine and his eyes sparkle with joy, Bill cupped Stan's face, faintly feeling the scars under his skin, and kissed him there and then.

The same place they grew up, their go-to spot from when they were in third grade. In a way, it was almost like destiny, like this place was destined to be the centre of all Bill's life. And Bill wouldn't have changed it for the world.

Stan's lips moved with his, softly and with care - but not because they were afraid one of them would break, but because they didn't need to rush. They had no reason to be firm or fast or rough. That would come, of course, but not tonight. Not on this cold February night. Bill's thumb softly stroked Stan's cheek as Stan's tongue grazed his lip, before retreating.

Stan's tongue knocked against Bill's lips half a dozen more times before Bill took the hint, letting Stan's tongue enter his mouth. It wasn't hot, heavy exploration - it was gentle, their tongues licking at each other - Bill could feel Stan smile into his mouth, it made him smile too. Their tongues retreated, and Bill gave Stan a chaste kiss, which made Stan grin.

Bill hadn't seen Stan this happy in a long time. But now he was, right here, right now - and Bill supposes that's all that matters. They stayed under the stars for a while longer, before retreating back home. Stan suggested Bill stay over - Bill agreed, they shared a knowing look. They didn't want to be apart again, they're in this together.

Bill lay, sleeping beside his... boyfriend. Yes, that sounds right this time. Wondering what he did to deserve such a wonderful boy to be his, wondering what he had done to let the moon and the stars bless him on this night. The answer, of course, was nothing. The moon, nor the stars had nothing to do with the two boys falling for each other. They were just a part of the lucky few who had fell in love with their best friend - and stayed that way.

Bill knew that with that kiss, he had sold his soul. He watched the gentle breathing motion of Stan's chest as he slept and thought, *I don't think I want it back.*

Home.